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Parallax

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Parallax

by Elizabeth Kadetsky

In Grandmaman's art room you couldn't see the floor. Everything was organized according to category—paint tubes, buttons in plastic trays, beads in plastic trays, toilet paper cylinders, egg cartons, six-pack rings, wax paper Pop-tart wrappers. To walk through, you followed a path from door to easel and from easel to palette table. A clutter of boxes and Publishers Clearing House sweepstakes entry forms spilled out from there into the living room and lay piled up along the walls, joining two- and three-D artworks, hurricane lamps, and tchotchkes. Grandmaman liked to sing Piaf:

A quoi ça sert, l'amour?

On raconte toujours

Des histoires insensées

A quoi ça sert d'aimer?

Grandmaman slept next to the art room in a bedroom on the first floor, which emitted a constant murmur from a small black-and-white TV. Grandpapa slept alone in the master bedroom upstairs—Grandpapa's room—where in the mornings Jill and I could hear him performing a hundred pushups, after which he emerged broad-chested in a Hanes V-neck and announced there were Pop-tarts for breakfast.

Evenings, Grandmaman and he argued—about Carter or the oil wars or her right to her bottle. "*Mon dieu*," she wailed if he asked her for something, or, "*C'est si bon*," she'd say,

ignoring him. Uncle Phil came to visit at night and also argued with her—and with Grandpapa—more or less about the same topics. Eventually, Grandpapa went to bed and Phil left for home—with his English shepherd, Margaret, and sometimes his pretty blond girlfriend, Val. And then Jill, Grandmaman, and I giggled, played cards, wrestled, and did crafts.

One Christmas-time, Jill and I came to Grandmaman and Grandpapa's in Wakefield ahead of our mother, who would arrive from our home in New York City a few days later. We'd come from our father's in Brookline. As usual, someone got lost driving us or picking us up. I think this time it was our father who cursed the streets of the city he'd known from birth for their roundabouts and flyovers and zigzag detours and lackluster signage. Boston was a city of insiders, each from his private enclave.

I remember how the art room had an easel with an oil still-life featuring two pears and an onion, while the actual objects sat posed on the other side of the room. The objects seemed crowded and uncomfortable, edged between a roll of canvas and a box of beach glass. The painting, though, had air inside it. It looked more real than real.

About this chaos, I thought: *I want to be an artist.*

The night before our mother's arrival, Grandmaman lay on the emerald green sofa in the living room underneath several of her multicolored, hand-crocheted afghans. She invited Jill and me to a tickle contest and then a toe-biting contest. Next, she brought out trays of beads and instructed Jill and me to help her string them onto long nylon threads for a beaded curtain between the dining room and kitchen.

There was no dinner. We ate store-bought sweets and snacks from the fridge when we were hungry. I loved every minute. Or perhaps my memory is playing tricks on me.

The next day, Grandpapa took his black Lincoln Continental to pick up our mother at South Station. Phil, Val, and Margaret waited with us. I think it was around this time I began noticing the world shift. I saw through a parallax vision. *Child. Adult. Child. Adult.* I was discovering how to make the slide, to match mindset to moment. I observed Phil and Val and Margaret one way, and then the other: Phil plays with the dog; Phil argues politics with the TV. It was as if he were two different Phils.

It was late afternoon. To mark our mother's arrival Grandmaman had dressed with a frilly bow in her curly, charcoal hair, and in a long coat constructed from a velvet bathrobe with glass chandelier crystals, snatches of lace, and ribbons attached. Margaret barked with excitement, and Phil and Val said, "*Shush now, Maah-gret, Maah-gret! Shush now!*" The house smelled of cigar.

Finally, the latch on the door of the old Tudor clicked open, and we rushed to greet the newcomers. What did Grandmaman pour to celebrate my mother's arrival? I didn't notice. "No, Mum," my mother said, shouldering off her leather Bomber jacket. Someone had given it to her, size extra-large for men, so it reached down to her hipbone and showed off the straight line of her rayon pants down to her heels. "You don't need to start so early, Mum," my mother said, still shouldering herself out of the bomber jacket, with Grandpapa's help now. Phil grabbed my mother in a hug and patted her butt. "No underwear!" he cried.

I was still a kid, though, in this moment, or chose to be one. Grandmaman's bottle looked like the bottles from *Scooby Doo*. I imagined it with a cartoon label: *B*, for Bottle. I never really thought about it, what was in Grandmaman's bottle.

Jill, our mother, and I would leave the next day, the twenty-fourth, to have our own Christmas Eve in New York. My adult self had a small glimmer of understanding that our mother actually cared about Christmas and wanted hers alone, that is, with just Jill and me.

Tonight, Grandpapa would take everyone to the country club for lobster. This would be nice, my mother kept saying. Jill's and my other grandparents said that our French grandparents spoiled us with things like lobster dinners. But I felt no guilt. Worse was leaving behind Margaret. She barked as we left, excluded from the celebrations. Jill and I watched Val as we piled into the car—her Frye boots, her long blond hair, her Wrangler jeans. She was wonderful.

Grandpapa pulled up to the curb to let us out before he parked. "Such a gentleman, Dad," my mother said to him as she stepped from the backseat. "I love a gentleman." It was very cold when we stepped into the air and onto the iced pavement.

Inside, our group sat at a giant, round, white-clothed table. Jill and I were across from each other and sent each other eyebrow raises when the lobsters arrived—seven lurid red beasts with their claws reaching out to us as if to congratulate us for our daring.

Phil sat on one side of me, Grandpapa on the other, so their argument flew across me—about gas prices, the Mideast, and Anwar Sadat. Phil was tall, thin, and blond—like a more handsome Shawn Cassidy. Jill waved a lobster leg and torpedoed a butter drop in my direction. There was drinking, I suppose. *What?* Scotch? Red wine? Gin martinis?

After a while, the lobsters had been defeated and the arguments called as truces. We walked into the cold and dark outside the country club. Our mother instructed Jill and me to thank Grandpapa for dinner.

"Thank you for dinner!"

"Thank you for dinner!"

He gathered us together in a giant hug. "I love you!" he cried. And we loved him back. He was so elegant, with his olive French complexion and long nose, his sensitive green eyes that were sparkly aquamarine like mine—or at least everyone said so.

"I love a tall man," my mother said, grabbing him in an escort-style elbow lock.

Who was with us when we discussed the car? I was not aware. I saw the ground iced with old snow, and white mounds at the shoulders hardened into ice-drifts. My gloved hand was in my mother's, and my grandfather said he'd get the car.

"What a gentleman!" my mother repeated. "I love it when a man goes around to get the car. Classy. Classy. You're a classy guy, Dad." She kissed him on a cheek and locked arms tighter with him. She was as tall as he; they were quite the stunning pair. "You're such a handsome fella, Dad. I love you, Dad. What a good man. Good looking too. I've found the perfect man."

And I filter. I ask now, Where were Phil and Val? Where was Grandmaman?

Grandpapa brought around the Lincoln, and Jill, our mother, and I filed into the back. We huddled toward one side in the back to make room for Val and Grandmaman. Our mother sat between us and held our hands. I looked behind the car and remembered the sharp bite of the cold outside and felt the respite of huddling together in the backseat with the car heater blowing dry wind at us. My grandfather's breathing was hard. Billowing white balls of breath emitted from the muffler tube. Perhaps this was the moment when everything turned.

Phil came out of the country club entrance. He held Grandmaman with a firm arm over her shoulder and led her while Val trailed behind holding two purses. Grandmaman's

bow was crooked in her charcoal hair, and the bathrobe-coat was off-kilter, held up by only one shoulder. The chandelier crystals sparkled with a reflection off the snow. Then Grandmaman turned on him and spit words at Phil and shook him off her. She walked past the car and into the parking lot, as if in a trance. Phil followed her. I could tell they were arguing because there were streams of white breath coming out of each of their mouths, hers moving in a forward direction, his aimed at the back of her head.

In my memory I see Grandmaman as a silhouette, a dreamlike figure in a long, cloak-like coat, her hair very active. I squint my eyes and imagine her as a nymph-like, forest creature.

They circled the parking lot. Then, my vision of her shifted, and a word, *alcoholic*, popped. I suddenly got it that Grandmaman was drunk, and that everyone was thinking about this too. I knew that my grandfather was disgusted and couldn't stand my grandmother and that my uncle was telling her, "Ma you want to do that? Then the world will see you," and my mother was embarrassed and angry and ashamed. My mother's eyes were closed. Grandpapa was staring very fiercely into the windshield, the angle of his gaze slightly askew from Grandmaman. The narrative of the nice dinner, the chivalric collecting of the car, the kissy-huggy congratulating—this was a decoy story, not the real plot of the tale at all.

I chose the other view again, the child's, and watched my grandmother as a nymph. It was as if I was looking at that drawing that morphs between a young woman and an old woman. You can see it one way, then the other, and then you have a hard time seeing it the first way again. I got a parallax feeling, like I was floating. And then, it was as if an avalanche washed over me as a new storyline took shape around my old memories of my

grandmother. The plot linking them together was different with this new key. She did *that* because she was drunk. And *that*, and *that*.

“What’s happening?” I challenged everyone in the car. I’d been betrayed.

No one answered.

My mother gripped my hand. Her anxiety transmuted into me.

Phil walked back to the car and slammed the door to the passenger seat behind him and didn’t say anything, and we continued to wait. Val stood under the awning shivering in the cold with the two purses, and Grandmaman continued to drift through the parking lot. I saw her as a belligerent drunk. I couldn’t shift the image back to the sprite again.

*

Now, I think of the silence of that moment. The five of us are holding our breaths. The car is aloft, floating in a timeless, in-between-the-instants-of-reality moment, as if it—and all of us inside, and the reality of the thing itself—have for a second simply stopped existing. We have disappeared. We have glided between the raindrops and found a hole in the corner of the universe. As long as we can all hold our breaths, we can keep that car aloft, and this experience will never exist within the bounds of a real, actual world. None of us is here, and yet we occupy a blissful no-place together.

I know where my mother went that night; she taught me how to get there, after all.

*

My mother always disappeared. Eventually, the disappearances came to seem a way of life. The space between one disappearance and the next began to get shorter, and the length of each grew longer. If, once, the disappearances represented who my mother *wasn't* to me, eventually they came to symbolize who she was. I think I was in college when I had this understanding. She was forty-three when I left for school, forty-eight when I graduated.

"Your mother always had Alzheimer's!" her friend Chris told me recently. Jill and I always said our mother practiced selective amnesia. But early onset Alzheimer's is known to be genetic in most cases, and the genealogy charts on both sides of my mother's French Catholic family go back to the settlement of Québec. My mother herself has nearly a hundred first and second cousins. There are enough alcoholics in the family to see distinctive genetic—or cultural?—trends, and yet there are no reports of Alzheimer's aside from Grandmaman's alcohol dementia. So maybe what I noticed when my mother was in her forties was something else.

Answers won't change the present, the fact my mother seems to have an incurable disease, a horrifying illness that kills by eating away at the brain, deteriorating the past. Answers don't change that. I do know that I believe she had these lapses because she wanted to disappear. If this is not important to the probing of her life, surely it is to mine.

✱

My mother has just turned sixty-eight and retired from her job. I know that Jill has brought her for memory testing at NYU. I know that my mother bought a new scarf and then loaned it to me when I saw her right afterwards because it was cold and then she

forgot it ever existed and insisted it wasn't hers when I tried to return it to her. I know that she and Jill are fighting about small things like keys in the freezer and a wallet in the oven and a lost MetroCard. But I don't yet have a name or a word or an image to organize these impressions and reports. I know that my mother is casting for words as well. "My memory..." she says. "But don't worry. I won't, you know..."

Forget me... I finish her sentence silently.

One day I call and she says, "Well I've very much enjoyed our conversation. Thank you very much for calling." And she hangs up on me. Next time, she can't believe how long it's been since she's seen me, but it's only been since Monday. "How are you? Where are you? I so much want to give you a—hig. I mean a hug. A hug and a kiss. A hig." While I'm on the phone with her, Jill, who's in the same room with her, texts me: *right now she's having a jolly fake talk with you after tormenting me for 2 hours. PHONY!!*

When my mother and I take a trip to Wakefield together shortly after, I really see. We pull up to Grandmaman's old Tudor, and I remember the winters here, like arid desert without the heat. It's windswept and barren. With so little moisture, it's as if there's no air. Sun beats down on the tarmac and turns the black pavement iridescent with newly melted ice. I think, *It's still winter*. I think, *It's always winter in Massachusetts, so damned cold*. Snowdrifts are charcoaled from car exhaust and hardened into barriers shiny, smooth and stone-solid. Frost has window-paned over the slate walkway.

I see a plain truth. My mother has Alzheimer's, or something—maybe strokes.

We've come to see Phil. Val died of lung cancer three years ago. Phil and Val's daughter—my cousin Nicole—is in her first year of med school. Grandpapa died in 1986. In 2005 Grandmaman died—of old age or alcohol dementia. She was ninety-one or ninety-

two. Earlier, she transferred the house to Phil and my mother. There was no will, or no will materialized. Phil moved into the house, and my mother doesn't know how to talk to Phil about getting her share of the inheritance. She suspects she is ill, and she's worried about being able to afford care.

We stay in Grandpapa's room. Phil acts like he doesn't notice my mother's condition. She is disoriented and blank. I've never seen her this absent. We sit on Phil's new leather sofas and chat—only she stares at me the whole time feigning comprehension and occasionally putting on a facial gesture. Why is Phil pretending, too?

My mother goes to bed early, and I bring up the house with Phil. He says things like, *I think maybe I saw an appraisal sometime, and, Maybe I saw a will somewhere*. I notice that his lips are very thin and that they are stuck in a straight line across. I go to bed.

Upstairs, my mother is asleep in one of the two twin beds, and she has all the objects from my suitcase spread over her body—a neck pillow, a yoga block, socks and underwear. She sits up and sleep talks. "Whose house is this?" she asks no one.

In the house, the bead curtain is still there. Phil has said that Grandmaman's collections and paintings are in the basement. Later, I ask Phil if I can take something home from the basement to remind me of Grandmaman, since this is the first time I've been here since her death. I think this means clearly a painting, but maybe I wasn't clear enough. He goes down and brings me back up a bag of yarn. I ask for needles. He finds some. I knit. My mother stares at the bundle in my hands, and Phil watches me too. Yarn and yearn, two words so close.

After breakfast, my mother and I go outside. Walking, she asks me what we're doing. I laugh, because I already told her several times.

“Stop,” she barks back. “Just stop. This is really difficult. Can’t you see?”

Then we stay quiet. At a certain point she holds out her hands and stops walking.

“Wait a minute,” she says. “Something just happened.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. It was weird. It’s like there’s an echo in my head and this strange... *thing...* out there.” She gestures to the space around her body.

“What is it?”

“It’s like this isn’t my body.”

To draw the parallel that is extending out in my mind as she says this—between the particular character of her separating from her body then and the particular and obviously different character of her disembodiment now—feels to reduce things. And yet in fact I too am floating, and so the thought gets lost and becomes vague and impressionistic and unliteral. I feel my heart has stopped and my breath has stopped and that I am both up in the air and here on the sidewalk with its centuries’-old granite rock wall. I feel that chill, that New England chill. It’s always so damned cold here, I think.